

*Proper 14 Year B*

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*Look Beyond*

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*Look beyond the bread you eat; See your Savior and your Lord.*

*Look beyond the cup you drink; See his love poured out as blood.*

Did any of you grow up with that song? It's by Darryl Ducote, so I don't think Jesus ever sang it. But I think those two words sum up the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, called the Bread of Life discourse. We started reading it at the end of July and will continue through the end of this month. But the abbreviated version is: Look beyond.

Give us a sign so that we can believe in you, the people demand. And Jesus replies -- look beyond. Look beyond the miraculous meal that I just fed you with five loaves and two fishes. Look beyond what you think you know about how God saves and who God saves. Look beyond the man standing before you.

And see bread. Now God's people have a particularly good imagination when it comes to bread. When Israel hungered in the desert, God sent them manna, which did not resemble actual bread at all. However, it sustained them physically, and it restored their faith in God emotionally and spiritually. It was the source of their life in the desert – even though it had a very short shelf life, as did human life at the time.

In today's Gospel, Jesus invites his followers to see him as bread sent from God in answer to their cry of hunger for deliverance, for life. He's talking here about eternal life, that God wants to share unending life with humanity.

And that's a stretch for many. The idea that Jesus was food from God, that a local neighbor kid was sent from heaven, was very hard for Jesus' people and many of his followers to swallow. As we read this story from John's gospel over the weeks, we'll find that it will cost him some disciples.

Another word for looking beyond is faith. Jesus' followers were asked to look beyond Jesus and see the bread of life. We are asked to look beyond the bread and wine on the altar here and see Jesus. Both of those things require the eyes of faith.

Jesus isn't just asking to be recognized, but to be consumed. The word that Jesus uses for eat in this chapter from John, is more like the eating the cows do or animals do. Much, chomp, masticate, swallow, repeat. This is not a polite sip or a little taste, Jesus is talking about.

Consider how our bodies respond to the food that we eat – how we are strengthened and nourished by it; how we die without it. The food we eat becomes one with our bodies. And that is what God wants the divine relationship with us to be like – like food that is the source of our life, and is one with our bodies.

When Jesus insisted that people believe in him, he was not looking for their confidence in him as a miracle worker, or a great teacher or a potential king. He wanted their belief in him to look much more like the act of chewing and swallowing and hungering for God. He wanted his people to be transformed by the food God gave them to eat. Because to swallow the bread of life, is ultimately to be consumed by God.

This is why Jesus ultimately made this metaphor of the bread of life abundantly clear and real in the Last Supper – take, eat, this is my body which is given for you. Drink this all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant.

If that makes you a little uncomfortable, you're not alone. Eucharist is not for the faint of heart. It is risky. It is a bit off-putting, this bread that's broken and torn into little pieces, this common cup that we're all supposed to drink out of – with the belief that is not just bread and wine but Jesus' very self.

As you probably know, we've been having a lot of conversation about the chances we take just by the way we consume the bread and wine up here – it is risky, for those who are concerned about germs, or allergies, or addictions, or where to go and what to say and how to stand. We have had a lot of conversations about sipping from a common cup vs dipping bread into the chalice, and what is safer or more comfortable. There is an ick-factor to be reckoned with, if we're honest.

And I have to say, I think Jesus relishes in the messiness of the meal. Because it's just a little bit out of our control. Next week we're going to bring back the option of intinction, with options to dip the bread in the wine on one side of the circle, and sip from the cup on the other side of the circle. There will also be gluten-free options. We're doing this so that more people can receive both the bread and the wine in ways that they are comfortable with. You can read my rector's note from this week's newsletter to learn more about that.

It will be a practice that we'll have to get used to – and it will be a little confusing and messy at first, I'm sure. But no matter what happens, the most important thing is to look beyond. Look beyond all those fears and concerns and see a God who wants to feed you with God's very self.

Receiving Jesus in bread and wine goes back to our earliest days as church. Following baptism, it was the visible act of a community's belief in Christ. It's also a meal that churches have long struggled with – Is everyone invited to the meal? Are they getting enough to eat? Are some too sinful to have Jesus actually touch their lips? Do all have the right ideas in their heads about what is happening at the Words of Institution? Are we receiving Jesus with the proper attitude and reverence?

I grew up in a tradition that at one time had a hard time with the thought of chewing the Communion wafer, and insisted the communicants be instructed to let it dissolve on their tongues. They got over that eventually. And those who grew up in the Episcopal Church likely knew many years when Eucharist was not celebrated every Sunday – lost over the years to concerns about worthiness and overshadowed by other rituals. It made its return with the revision of the 1979 Prayer Book, when many Christian denominations were looking back to our earliest traditions as points of common ground, and common table.

At that time we were looking beyond all the ways that we were divided over Eucharist, and seeing new ways to be in Communion.

Last week I talked about how the freedom that God promises is actually dependence on God and one another. Another word for that dependence is communion. Oneness. Union. And that is also very risky. Because it can be all consuming.

The section of the Letter to the Ephesians that we heard today suggests what Communion looks like in practice, what consuming the bread of life and the cup of salvation make the faith community capable of doing.

Communion looks like being members of one another, limbs of an interdependent body. It looks like speaking truth in such a way that people are built up and graced. It looks like working in order to have something to give away. It suggests we can manage inevitable feelings like anger and disappointment and bitterness, and opt to be kind, and tenderhearted and forgiving.

This is also what everlasting life looks like in practice. It starts with this life, messy as it is, dependent as we are on one another and on God to feed us with what such a life requires.

Ultimately our communion with God makes us capable of imitating God, the way children imitate a parent. It makes us capable of walking in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Amen.